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Travellers 'kept 100 enslaved' across UK

Police charge four men after raids on camps

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The full scale of a suspected slavery ring targeting homeless and vulnerable men emerged yesterday as *The Times* learnt that more than 100 people are believed to have been held prisoner across the country.

Police suspect that a network of Irish travellers is behind an organised crime operation to kidnap or recruit homeless Britons and Eastern Europeans over the past two decades and force

'This is a family-run business'



them into unpaid work, while holding them in squalid conditions on starvation rations.

After the rescue of 24 men from putrid and cramped caravans, sheds and horse boxes at the Greenacres travellers' encampment in Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire, it has emerged that raids carried out at four other travellers' sites across five counties are believed to be linked through a family with the surname Connors.

Four men were charged last night under Section 71 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 with the offence of holding someone in slavery or servitude or requiring a person to perform forced or compulsory labour. They were Tommy Connors, 30, Patrick Connors, 19, James "Big Jim" Connors, 34, and James "Jimmy" Connors, 23. A heavily pregnant woman was bailed.

Since March this year, at least 60

"slaves", mostly recruited in homeless shelters, Jobcentres and on the streets, have been saved from what Bedfordshire Police described as a "family-run business and organised crime group" that put people to work across Britain and in Scandinavia.

They were allegedly made to carry out manual labour such as laying paving stones, and threatened with violence if they tried to escape.

A source close to the Serious Organised Crime Agency, whose branch the UK Human Trafficking Centre has provided intelligence and surveillance support to at least five police forces involved, said that other investigations into the network were continuing and further arrests expected. The number of victims could exceed 100.

Detective Chief Inspector Sean O'Neil, of Bedfordshire Police, said: "New legislation has allowed the investigation more scope and takes into account emotional rather than physical harm. I am confident that while the investigation is in its early stages this is a family-run business and is an organised crime group that has been broken up."

Paul Donohoe, of Anti-Slavery International, said: "When children abscond from care homes and are trafficked, we understand that local authorities have failed. When someone is homeless or has a drinking problem, they are falling through the net."

The original investigation is thought to have been prompted by the discovery in March 2008 of the body of a man named as Christopher Nicholls, close to the Beggar's Roost caravan site in Gloucestershire. He had been missing since 2005. In March 2010, police

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Unshaven and covered with flea bites, David Walliams celebrates the end of his eight-day charity swim of the Thames at County Hall in London. News, page 3

Walliams the Big Briton after his £1 million swim

Tehran is accused of hypocrisy over rights

Martin Fletcher

Britain will accuse Iran today of "breathtaking hypocrisy" for supporting the revolutions sweeping the Arab world while crushing dissent at home.

Addressing a seminar organised by *The Times* on Iran's human rights abuses, William Hague is expected to condemn Tehran for "suppressing protest at home while claiming to support revolutions elsewhere in the region — with the notable exception of Syria".

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Iranian Supreme Leader, and President Ahmadinejad applauded the popular uprisings against repressive regimes such as those of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the Bahraini monarchy and Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, claiming that they were inspired by the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran.

But Iran is doing its utmost to help President Assad to suppress the uprising in Syria, supplying the regime with equipment and technical advice based on its own suppression of the wide-

THE TIMES Imprisoned in IRAN

spread protests triggered by Mr Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election in 2009. Syria is Tehran's conduit for channelling weapons to Hezbollah and Hamas to fight a proxy war with Israel.

The Foreign Secretary's speech will turn the spotlight back on Iran, viewed by the West as by far the most dangerous country in the region, after eight months dominated by the Arab Spring.

The Times has campaigned for the release of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani, who has been sentenced to death by stoning, but tonight's conference aims to highlight the plight of hundreds of others abused by Iran.

Mr Hague is expected to say that Iran's efforts to resist demands for freedom sweeping the Middle East and North Africa are doomed to fail because "2011 has shown that demands for human dignity are irrepressible".

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IN THE NEWS

Kenya murder arrest

Police have arrested a man suspected of involvement in the murder of a British tourist and the kidnap of his wife from a beach lodge in Kenya at the weekend. News, pages 4, 5

New Met Police chief

Bernard Hogan-Howe, a policeman with a track record of confronting gangs and cutting crime, has been named as the new head of Scotland Yard. News, page 6

Banking shake-up

Britain's banks have been granted an eight-year grace period to implement reforms that will make the UK one of the strictest financial regimes in the world. News, pages 8, 9

Boundaries battle

Cabinet ministers will have to oust MPs from their own parties to save their careers under landmark proposals to redraw the political map of Britain. News, page 14

Greek default fears

The threat of credit rating downgrades combined with fears of an imminent default by Greece sent shockwaves through the French banking sector. Business, page 33

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Frill a minute for the Brits in New York
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